

CONCLUSION

The coming of the Fatimids as rulers of al-Maghreb and Egypt marked a new era in the history of Islam because they posed serious intellectual and political challenges to the existing order.

The Fatimids were moved by more than personal or dynastic ambition. They were the heralders of a new intellectual and religious philosophy, which aimed at nothing less than the transformation and renewal of Islam and the establishment of the universal Isma'ili Imamate. As Isma'ili Shi'ites, they refused to offer even token submission to the Abbasid caliphs, the usurpers; they and they alone were the true Imams, by descent and by God's choice, the sole rightful heads of the Islamic community. The Caliphate was theirs by right, and they would take from the Abbasids as the Abbasids had taken it from the Umayyads.

The Fatimid state sprung into existence and rapidly expanded into an empire as a result of the widespread Isma'ili propaganda carried on by their *Da'wat* (missionary movement). The *Da'wat*, during the Fatimid period, was organized into a branch of government with its own functions, structure, and hierarchy, under the directions of the chief missionary and the ultimate authority of the Caliph in his capacity as Imam. The *Da'wat* was responsible for formulating Isma'ili theology and for carrying out missionary work amongst the public, and for gaining the adherence to the Fatimid cause of as many local rulers as possible.

The Fatimids thus gave their distinctive doctrines a central importance in their political system. Isma'ili theology provided the basis to the

caliphate and denied that of the Abbasids. As long as the Abbasids survived, the Fatimids were engaged in a religious and ideological conflict, in which doctrine was their most powerful weapon. Thus the Fatimids accorded prime importance to the formulation and elaboration of their creed. First in North Africa and then in Egypt, a series of distinguished theologians wrote what became the classical works of Isma'ili literature. Most of the authors had served in the Mission and some like Hamid al-Din as-Kirmani and al-Muayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi had been its chiefs.

It was not enough merely to formulate an ideology, for there was also the more practical business of disseminating it. For this purpose, the *Da'wat* sent highly educated and trained missionaries to other areas. In Cairo, the Fatimids founded great libraries and colleges where *Da'is* were trained to go out into the field, and to give further instruction to new converts. The best known of these colleges were the Darul Hikmah and the Al-Azhar. When Nasir Khusraw visited Al-Azhar in 1047 A.D., he found 317 professors and as many as 9758 students engaged in the study of logic, mathematics, law, physics, astronomy and theology. The Al-Azhar contained 200,000 manuscripts among which were such treasures as 2400 illuminated copies of the Holy Qur'an, manuscripts in the handwriting of Ibn Muglah and other master calligraphers, and an autographed copy of the history written by the famous historian Al-Tabbari. Access to these library treasures was free to all. A large fund, established by the Caliph al-Hakim was spent on books, scholarships and on the upkeep of the colleges. Al-Azhar retained the stature of one of the great educational institutions of the Islamic world and still exists as a flourishing university in Cairo.

Many eager converts came to Cairo from Sunni lands in the East to study at these colleges and then returned to their own countries as exponents of the Isma'ili message and workers for the Fatimid cause. One such person was the Persian poet and philosopher, Nasir-i-Khusraw. A convert to Isma'ilism, he went to Egypt in 1047 A.D. and returned to preach the faith in Iran and Central Asia, where he won a considerable following. Hasan-bin-Sabbah, converted by a Fatimid agent in Iran, also went to Egypt in 1078 A.D. and stayed there for about three years.

The Isma'ili message had considerable appeal to different elements in the population. It was a time of great social, economic, political and intellectual upheaval in the Islamic world. As in late Umayyad times there were many who felt that the Islamic community had gone astray and that a new leader, with new messages, was needed to restore the community to the right path. There was withdrawal of consent from the existing order, a loss of confidence in hitherto accepted answers. The Abbasid Caliphate, and with it the Sunni order, began to weaken; some new principle of unity and authority was required to save Islam and the Muslims from destruction. To many, the Isma'ili principles offered a design for a new and just world order, under the Imam. For the pious, they brought a deep spiritual faith, sustained by the example of the suffering of the Imams and the self-sacrifice of their followers. For the intellectual, they brought a comprehensive explanation of the universe, synthesizing the data of revelation and philosophy, science and mysticism. For the rebellious, there was a well-organized and widespread movement, supported by a rich and powerful ruler far away, and offering a seductive prospect of radical change.

Fatimid had also gained supremacy on the seas that was possible due to their knowledge of astronomy and geography. The Fatimid Caliphs were great patrons of science and learning, thus encouraging research in astronomy and geography. There were big observatories in Cairo where scholars could follow the movement of the stars. Ibn Yunus, who worked in these observatories, is considered one of the greatest astronomers of the Islamic World. An astrolabe (instrument for measuring altitude of the sun and stars at sea) developed in the time of Imam Mu'izz can still be seen in London. Geography formed an important part of the curriculum at the Al-Azhar. The Caliph Mu'izz was greatly interested in geography and made various efforts to promote this science.

The Fatimid rule in al-Maghreb and Egypt thus made fundamental contributions to the field of philosophy, science, literature and architecture, which served as essential inputs for a civilization that came to be known as the great Islamic civilization.